

The Stories You Could Tell

Using NARA Regional Resources for Site Interpretation

The interpretive program of the Parkway has had only a good start; it is on paper for the most part. The delay occasioned by the war has been costly in deterioration of many of our exhibits. We must take up the work soon or all will be lost

Stanley W. Abbott
Resident Landscape Architect, Blue Ridge Parkway, 1946

A unique, colorful, and often overlooked perspective on National Park Service sites awaits NPS historians, staff, and other researchers who take up the work of interpreting these national treasures. Interpretive decisions, tourism efforts, CCC and WPA programs, local culture, site nomenclature, neighborhoods, industry, even issues of race, class, and gender are just some of the topics captured in archival NPS records held by the regional facilities of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Office of Regional Records Services.

Though typically created to document site development, administration, and use, the NARA regional records also provide a remarkable treatment of many cultural, environmental, and historical issues. These files (some dating from the turn of the century to the early 1970s) regularly include maps, reports, building plans, news clippings, and photographs, but the files and their contents are as varied as the parks themselves. If the records were only used, the stories they could tell!

Some NPS site researchers may presume that most materials created by or about a site remain at the site, are at NPS headquarters in Washington, or have been forwarded to an NPS specialized office. Over the years, however, many individual NPS sites and NPS regional offices transferred their permanent materials to NARA regional facilities responsible for permanent federal records from specified areas. For example, the NARA-Northeast Region facility in New York serves New York and New Jersey. Records of the NPS are maintained in NARA as Record Group 79. **Note:** The inclusive dates, scope, content, quality, and quantity of NPS materials varies from region to region, and all the

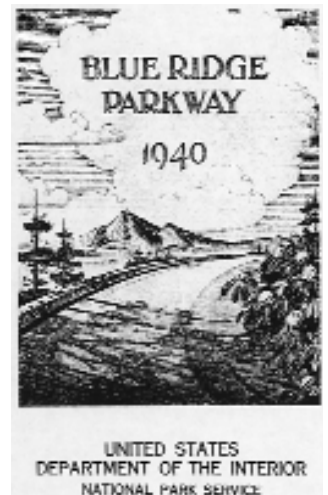
types of records described below may not be available at all NARA regional facilities.

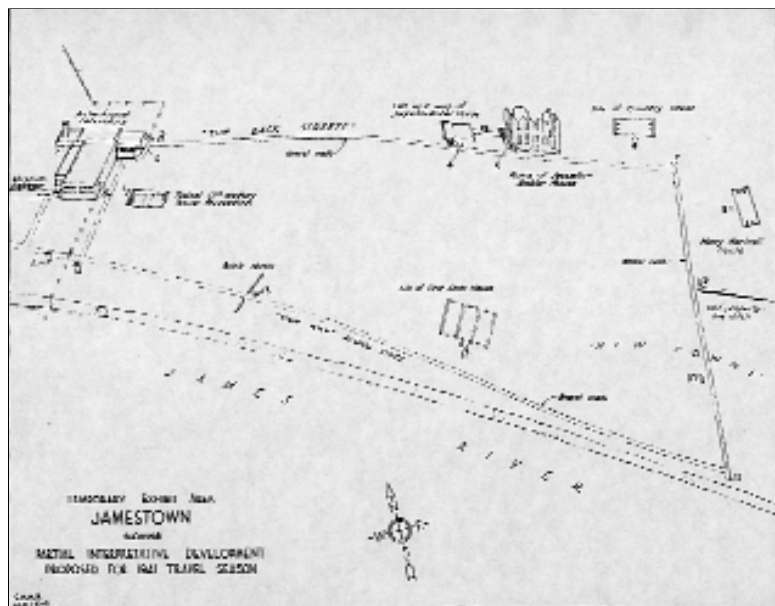
NPS Records

NPS site files often begin with projects to acquire land. Negotiations for the acquisition of sites usually reveal substantive information about prior use and ownership, related assets, and the people of the community at the time of the government's earliest interest. Early site appraisals often include photographs, maps and drawings, descriptions of current residents or neighborhoods, mineral and water surveys, agreements with municipalities, reports on proposed land use, debate over essential property, and offers to sell land to the United States or challenges to the acquisition. When landowners would not sell and the United States condemned the property, the NPS files often note the Federal court condemnation case number. Most NARA regional facilities maintain the Federal court condemnation cases for states in their region, and these can provide additional information regarding property provenance, genealogy, and social relationships as the court clarifies title or reconciles disputes over land values.

The NPS records capture the earliest ideas about how parks would be administered, from where, and by whom. They also provide a unique window into some of the first decisions made about site interpretation. Should, for example, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park be interpreted as a scenic natural area or as a focal point for the pioneer experience? How could the naturalistic aspects be reconciled with the lived-in look of occupied areas? Could the awe-inspiring beauty be shared with, yet protected from, thousands of visitors? How should the people of the area be represented? These are just a few of the interpretive issues documented in

NPS records at NARA regional facilities may include copies of newspaper clippings, event programs, and brochures such as this 1940 Blue Ridge Parkway brochure found in Central Files of the NPS Region I office. (Record Group 79, NARA-Mid Atlantic Region).





Plan for partial development of exhibit area at Jamestown Island proposed for the 1941 travel season, as found in records of the Colonial National Parkway. (Record Group 79, NARA-Mid Atlantic Region).

records of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park held by NARA facilities in Atlanta and Philadelphia.

Early decisions about cultural resource interpretation often gave rise to debate over the appropriateness of existing structures and which structures, even areas, should be rehabilitated or set aside. Building appraisals in the files may be very general or they may provide detailed descriptions of structures, including inventories of site-specific furnishings, photographs, or drawings. **The files may also provide evidence of earlier preservation or restoration efforts, or earlier treatments applied to the site.** New construction is inconsistently documented. In some files construction is described in general terms for higher offices, while others contain surprisingly thorough construction plans, photographs, drawings, contracts, and maps.

No less compelling are records relating to natural resources and landscape interpretation. Complete or partial landscape development plans may be found in the files, as well as plant lists, garden plans, vegetation surveys, or procedures for improving fields and woods. Instructions for the pruning of trees at the Andrew Jackson National Historic Home site in Tennessee, for example, provide early evidence of what trees were on the site at the time of acquisition. Depending on the type of park, wildlife surveys and records relating to regional and site-specific wildlife programs may be also be present.

National Park Service employees may be especially amused as they read of the experiences of those who went before them. Files may include copious instructions regarding local procedures, uniforms, staffing, and salaries—even the replacement of ranger badges. Any park employee or affili-

ate that has wondered “where did that idea come from?” may find the answers here. The files can be inspirational—vividly capturing the legacy of folks who fought to establish sites or dedicated themselves to their service. The records speak of the triumphs and tragedies of real people whose lives and the parks were connected.

Who could not be moved by the unfolding drama at Appomattox when townspeople protested the use of black CCC camps for park construction in 1940? Imagine the social climates in which Pine Spur on the Blue Ridge Parkway was established for the exclusive use of Negro visitors or in which Japanese evacuees were housed at former CCC barracks at Death Valley National Monument during World War II.

Challenges of Using NPS Records in RG 79

Researchers inspired to use these records should be forewarned of their inherent challenges. While many records were sent directly from individual NPS sites to NARA, many more were first forwarded to NPS *regional* offices and then accessioned by NARA as records of the NPS regional office. Few agencies have had a more complicated set of regional boundary changes than the National Park Service.

NARA regions are not necessarily the same as NPS regions. NARA regional facilities may have records outside their prescribed state holdings because the NPS regional offices administered sites beyond those states. **In some instances researchers may need to contact more than one NARA facility for a complete record of a site, especially if the NPS regional office has changed over time.** For example, some records of Olympic National Park can be found at the facilities in Seattle and San Bruno; Grand Canyon National Park is documented at facilities in Laguna Niguel (CA) and Denver; and records of Isle Royale National Park in Michigan are found at NARA facilities in Chicago, Kansas City, and Philadelphia.

Other Records for NPS Site Research

In addition to the NPS records in RG 79, NARA regional facilities hold materials created by other federal agencies that may also document parks or the areas, people, and activities relating to them. Most NARA facilities have a complete set of U.S. Population Schedules 1790-1920 for all states in which the federal census was taken and is extant, not just the states they serve. A snapshot of the nation taken every 10 years, federal census records can capture building occupants and neighborhoods over time.

The value of federal court condemnation cases has been noted above, but other categories of federal court cases (RG 21 or RG 276) may also be useful for site interpretation. During the Civil War,



Inventory of
Robert E. Lee's
personal property
at Arlington House
at the time of con-
fiscation by the
U.S. District Court
in Alexandria.
(Record Group 21,
NARA-Mid Atlantic
Region).

*Inventory of Good, Good personal property
at Arlington House, Alexandria, Aug 24th 1863*

11 Sofa bottom chairs	2 Marble top Stairs
4 Worn red plush chairs	2 Hair Matresses
1 Bessels Carpet	1 large Wardrobe
3 red plush seat sofas	1 large Wardrobe
7 Large Paintings in Hall	2 Mirrors "
1 Extension Dining table	2 Bureau Candelsticks
1 Large Writing of Writing	2 Mirrors "
1 Tent his officers made	1 Large glass Case (Clock)
Bottlefield	7 Paintings
4 Book cases	7 Drawings
6 Worn bottom chairs	3 Picture frames
9 Bookshelves	1 Marble Stair
2 Wardrobes	1 Small, long, shallow
3 Wash Stairs	1. Secretary
3 Stairs	10 small frames
1 Centre Table	1 large Map of Va
1 Extension Wash Chair	2 Small Wooden chairs
12 Worn B. Chairs	9 1/2 Wash Stair
1 Small Book case	2 Worn frames of glass
2 Mirrors	1 Carpet, 2 3 Worn of chairs
1 pair hand Stairs	3 Stairs
4 Worn Stairs	1 Marble top Wash Stair
1 Marble top 3 1/2 Worn	1 large Secretary
2 Marble top 2 Stairs	4 Stairs
2 side boards	3 Mirrors
1 Marble top Wash table	2 Towels

for example, the federal court at Alexandria, Virginia, confiscated Robert E. Lee's Arlington estate and the extant case file at Philadelphia includes inventories of furnishings in the house at the time of confiscation. A Ninth Circuit Court ruling found at the San Francisco facility documents concerns about logging and mining at the Grand Canyon forest reserve in 1918. Federal criminal cases at the Fort Worth facility colorfully capture the work of Fort Smith's Hanging Judge Parker, and federal bankruptcy cases invariably enumerate the property and debts of bankrupt individuals and businesses.

The maritime aspect of many NPS sites may be documented in federal admiralty cases (RG 21), customs or lighthouse records, or lifesaving station logs (RG 26, 36, and 41). For example, the Chicago facility holds life saving station logs from Sleeping Bear Point Life Saving Station, now part of the

Sleeping Bear National Lakeshore in Michigan. The Philadelphia facility has lighthouse drawings from the Assateague Island Lighthouse and many of the lighthouses on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

The NARA facility at Boston, like several other facilities, holds Bureau of Public Roads (RG 30) materials relating to national park road projects. Inmate and administrative records among Bureau of Prisons records (RG 129) at the San Bruno (CA) facility reveal a different view of Alcatraz Penitentiary. The facility at Anchorage maintains Alaskan Aerial Survey Expedition records (1926-29) in RG 57, providing early aerial survey records of Glacier Bay National Park. Several regional facilities have park-related materials created by other agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers (RG 77), Naval Districts and Shore Establishments (RG 181), War Assets Administration (RG 270), and Coast and Artillery Defenses (RG 392). There are many more examples. Careful considerations of how NPS sites were used over time and how sites, once established, interacted with other federal agencies should reveal additional NARA research possibilities.

Access to Archival Records in NARA Facilities

Regional reference staffs are equipped to discuss prospective researcher projects and direct researchers to appropriate sources, but they cannot undertake major research for them. All facilities have finding aids to their RG 79 and related records and some have detailed box and folder listings. Reference queries can be made by phone, Internet, or in writing, and researchers are always welcome to view material in regional facility research rooms. Prospective researchers are encouraged to call ahead prior to a research visit. General information on each facility, its holdings, and services is also available on the NARA Web site at <<http://www.nara.gov/regional/nmenu.html>>.

Conclusion

The stories that **could** be told **should** be told. The quick samples illustrated here represent a fraction of the compelling stories found in more than 3,500 cubic feet of archival RG 79 materials held by the NARA regional facilities. Whether high drama or routine administration, these records provide a unique window into NPS sites over time for interpretation. They certainly should not be silent bounties of history tucked in Hollinger boxes. Those who now take up the work of site interpretation are encouraged to use them.

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